

Blackfoot River Recreation Management

2012 Annual Report

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks • 3201 Spurgin Road • Missoula, MT 59804 • (406) 542-5500



Introduction

Located near Missoula Montana, the Blackfoot River is one of Montana's most popular rivers for recreation. Visitors to the Blackfoot enjoy beautiful scenery and a diverse range of recreational opportunities such as angling, whitewater boating, inner-tubing, camping, picnicking and sunbathing.

In addition to public access sites, the Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor Landowner's Agreement provides public access to private land 50 feet above the high water mark, unless otherwise stipulated. This agreement is a product of visionary Blackfoot landowners and cooperative managing agencies. The Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor extends from Russell Gates Fishing Access Site (FAS) to Johnsrud Park FAS.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) manages recreation on and along the Blackfoot River in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) through a cooperative management agreement. The following report

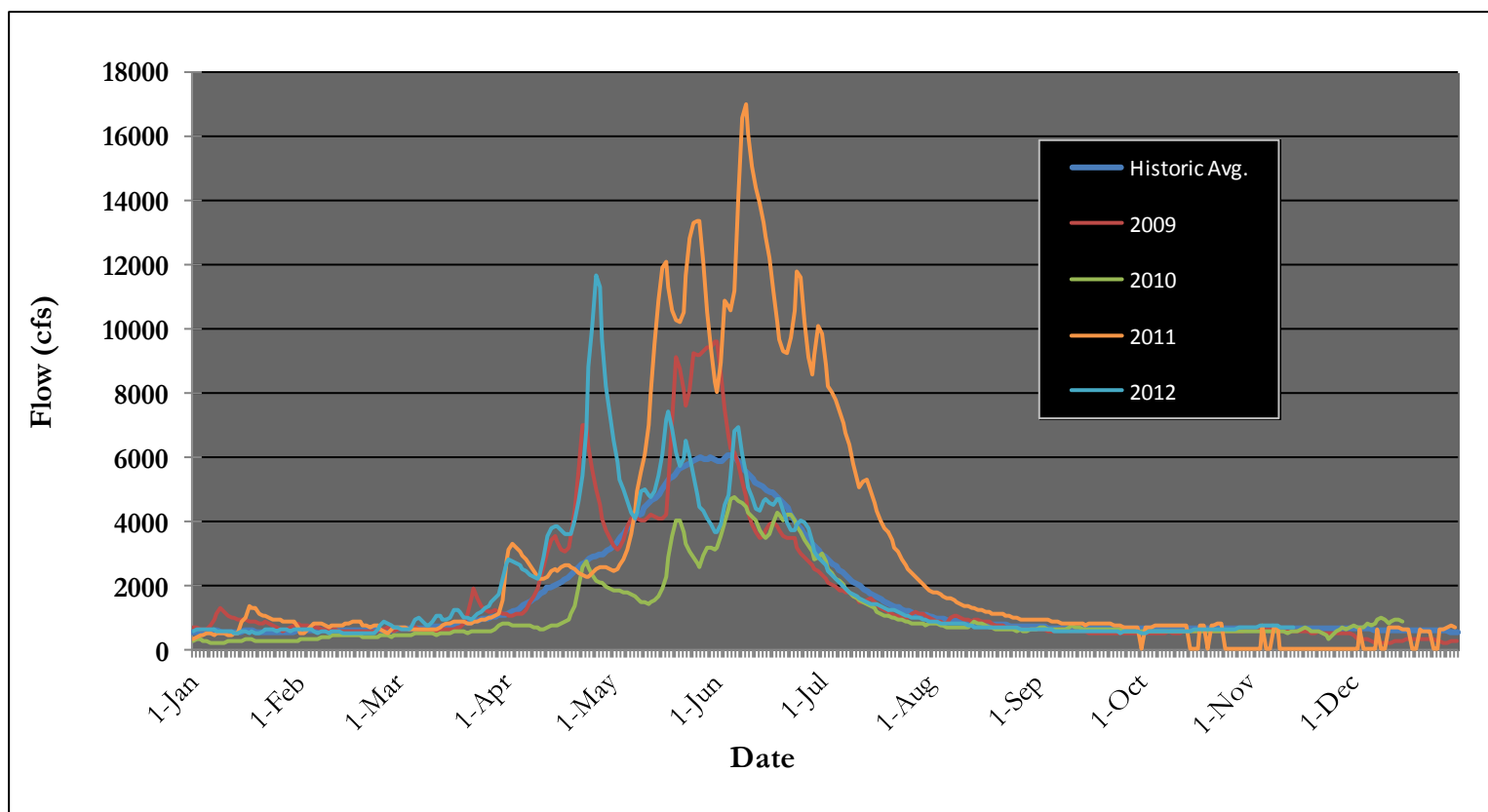
summarizes program components, visitor use statistics, management activities and accomplishments from 2012.

Seasonal Conditions

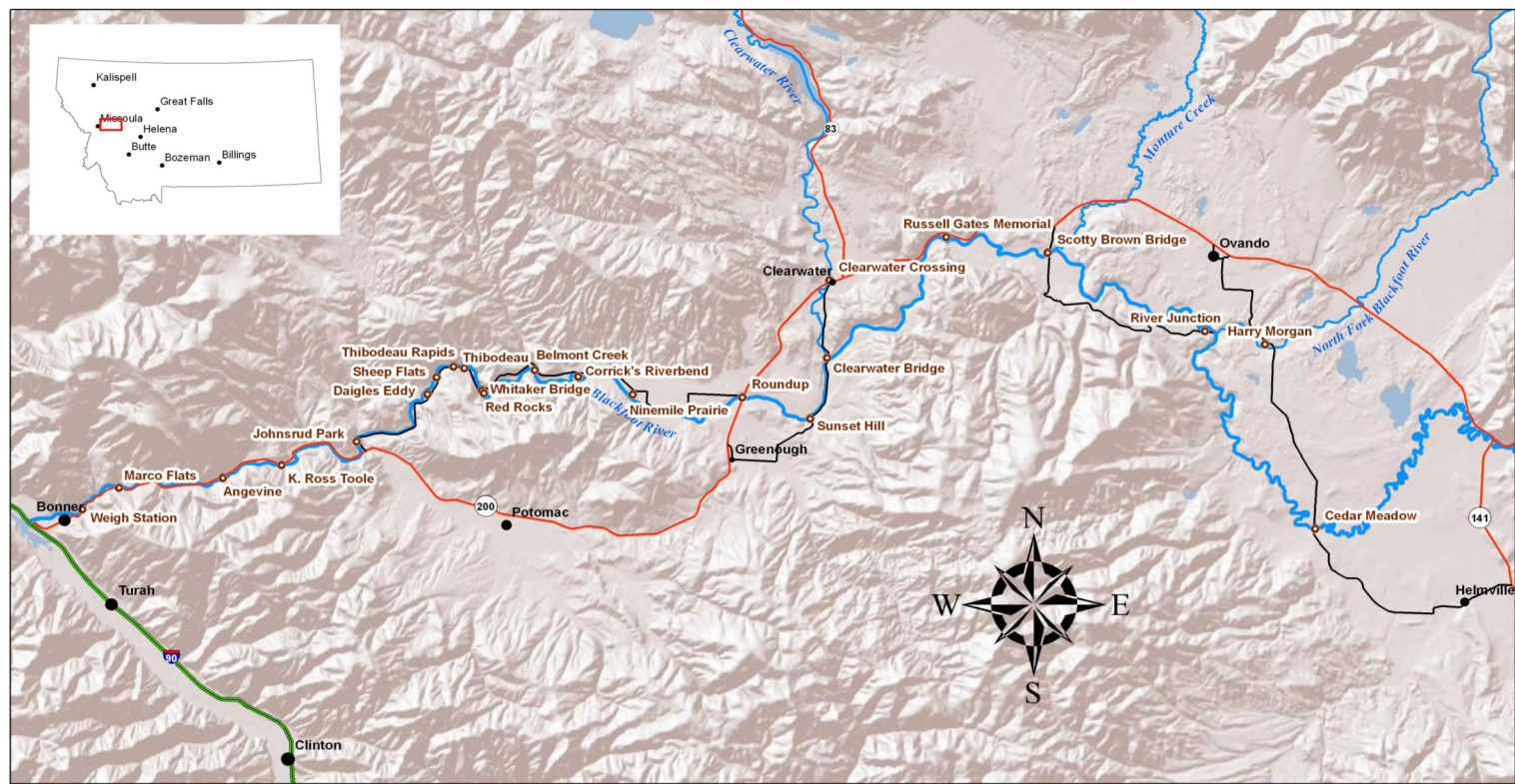
Figure 1 shows the hydrograph for the Blackfoot River in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and the historic average. This graph compares the river's flow throughout the year and helps to explain how water levels affect recreation on the Blackfoot. This data was taken at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Bonner gauging station (#12340000).

The 2012 river flows were well above the historic average of 6,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), with the Blackfoot rising to over 11,000 cfs. The Blackfoot River was extremely high earlier in the season, during the months of April and May, returning to historically normal flows by early July. Some FAS's were closed or provided only limited access due to flooding in April and May.

Figure 1: Blackfoot River Flows—2012 Compared to 2011, 2010, 2009 and the Historical Average.



Map 1: The Blackfoot River & Access Sites



Seasonal conditions affected use but were minor when compared to the effects of the 2011 high water year. The higher than average spring flows altered use patterns with an increase in whitewater traffic during the early season. Mid to late summer was very dry and brought water flows in line with traditional levels. As water flow decreased, use by anglers and recreational floaters increased. There were no seasonal fishing restrictions but a very dry late summer and ongoing fires lead to stage 1 fire restrictions lasting into September.

Staff

The Blackfoot River recreation management program is based out of the FWP Region 2 Headquarters in Missoula, MT. Staff administers the Special Recreation Permit (SRP) program, day-to-day operations, program implementation, and compilation of reports related to recreation on the Blackfoot River. Managers are assisted by the following FWP staff who have responsibilities specific to managing recreation on the Blackfoot River:

- FAS Coordinator (year-round)
- Blackfoot River Ranger (3/4 year)
- Blackfoot Survey Technician (May-Aug.)
- Upper Blackfoot Caretaker (May-Aug.)
- Lower Blackfoot Caretaker (May-Aug.)

In addition to staff dedicated specifically to the Blackfoot, there are other FWP personnel such as a Regional River

Ranger, Regional FAS Maintenance Crew, Program Managers, Wardens and Biologists who also contribute to management of the Blackfoot.

Blackfoot River Reaches

For the purpose of managing recreation, the Blackfoot River is broken into eight reaches. These reaches are defined geographic sections of the river based on the physical settings and types of recreational experiences associated with each reach. Additionally, maximum group size limits have been established specifically for each reach. Table 1 lists the eight reaches and a description of their locations.

Table 1: Blackfoot River Reaches

Reach	Reach Description
1	Headwaters to Mineral Hill
2	Mineral Hill to North Fork Confluence
3	Harry Morgan FAS (on the North Fork) to Russell Gates FAS
4	Russell Gates FAS to Roundup FAS
Upper 5	Roundup FAS to Whitaker Bridge
Lower 5	Whitaker Bridge to Johnsrud Park FAS
6	Johnsrud Park FAS to Bonner
7	North Fork of the Blackfoot River from the USFS boundary to Harry Morgan FAS

Visitor Use Statistics

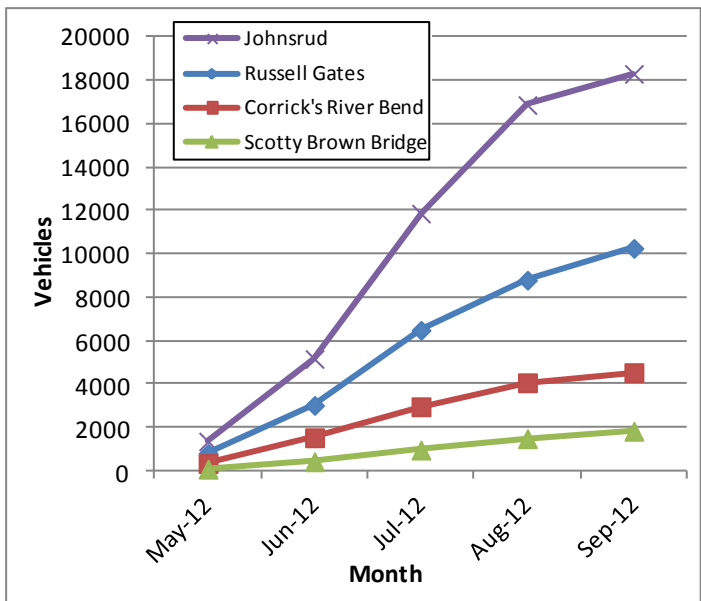
To assess visitor use on and along the Blackfoot River, FWP utilizes electronic traffic counters at selected access sites throughout the Blackfoot, floater self-registration kiosks at boat launches and reported use data from the Blackfoot Special Recreation Permitting (SRP) program. In past years, statewide FWP angling surveys have been used in conjunction with these data sources to better understand use on the Blackfoot, however the latest available results were from 2009 and have not been included in this report.

Electronic Traffic Counts

Traffic counts are collected at certain sites along the Blackfoot River through the use of electronic counters. These counters record the number of vehicles using sites, and data is collected by FWP staff and compiled on a monthly basis. This data can be used to compare the amount of traffic using a site over the course of a season and to compare use trends from one year to the next.

Figure 2 compares the cumulative traffic counts of four Blackfoot River fishing access sites with counters during the course of the 2012 summer season. Johnsrud Park FAS received double the amount of vehicles, compared to the other sites, which would be expected since it's one of the busiest FASs on the Blackfoot River. Scotty Brown Bridge received the least amount of vehicle traffic, which can be attributed, in part, to the parking limitations (four spaces) of the site.

Figure 2: Cumulative Traffic Counts for the Blackfoot River Fishing Access Sites (May through September) 2012

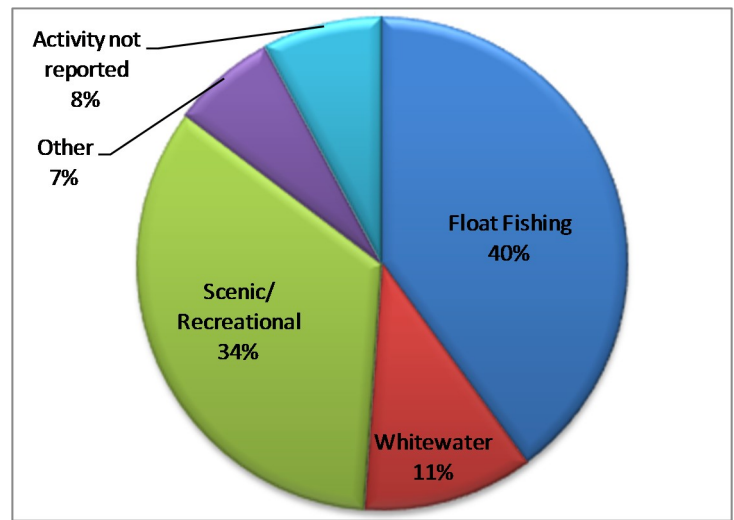


Floater Self-Registration

Floater self-registration kiosks were introduced to the upper reaches of the Blackfoot in 2010. Additional self-registration kiosks were installed at sites in 2011 and 2012. Information collected from the self-registration program includes location of launch and take out, time and date, type of activity engaged in on the river, how long a person was on the water, how many other boats they observed and their satisfaction with the number of other boats they encountered on the river.

In 2012, 919 self-registration coupons (deposited at put-ins) were completed, which was slightly more than the 826 completed in 2011 and up 20% from 2010. Stubs, which are separated from coupons and deposited at take-out locations totaled 417 in 2012, up 2% from 2011.

Figure 3: Recreational use types reported via self-registration (2012)



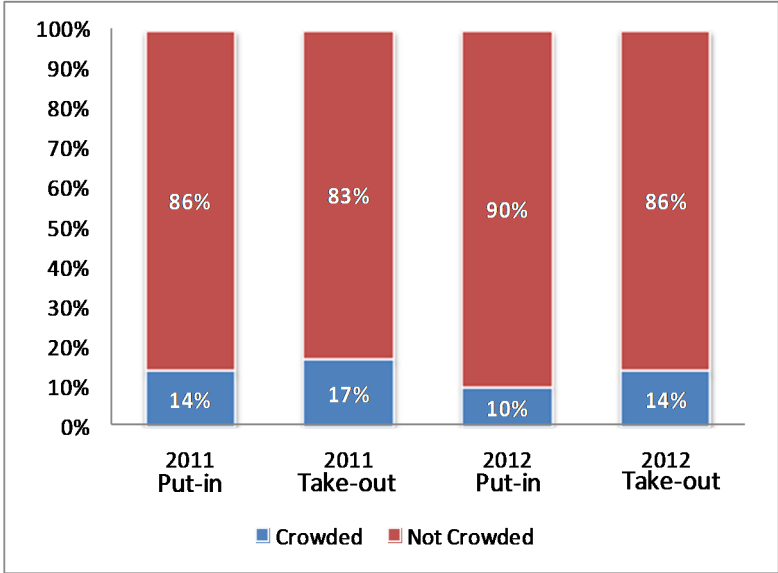
The two part coupon allows the stub to be returned at the take-out with information pertaining the type and quality of the float. The majority of use was float fishing, with scenic and recreational floating second (Figure 3). The average number of people in a group was just under 6, with 2 boats per group spending 4.8 hours per float. This is consistent with use reported in 2011.

Harry Morgan FAS was the most popular put-in for self-registration in 2012. The 4 highest use put-ins were: (1) Harry Morgan, (2) Russell Gates (3) Johnsrud and (4) Round Up. Figure 4 shows a comparison of the perceived crowding at either the put-in or take-out. Most (83-90%), found neither the put-in nor the take-out to be crowded.

Most (72%) of the written comments provided on the stubs were positive such as “Good day on the river” or “Russ Gates is awesome” This marked a considerable

increase in positive comments when compared to 59% in 2010 and 53% in 2011. Concerns voiced in the written comments were organized by theme and included categories such as parking, commercial use, water quality concerns, and requests for additional self registration stations.

Figure 4: Access site crowding reported via self-registration



The number of floaters who filled out self-registration cards followed a trend similar to that of vehicles recorded by car counter, moving through the same sites. This relationship suggested compliance that was consistent with access site visitation.

Through the 2012 season, volunteers and FWP staff monitored kiosks and surveyed self-registration compliance. Of those observed, 27% filled out registration cards without being contacted, up 4% from 2011. Of those

who did not fill out a registration card, 57% said they were unaware of the self-registration process. Once contacted, 77% of those who had been unaware of the self-registration process chose to complete a self-registration card. 8% of self registration cards were from commercial outfitters.

In 2013, FWP will continue to monitor self-registration kiosks and enhance public awareness of the self-registration process as well as the value of data and feedback gathered through self-registration. The data collected via the self-registration program is an important component of FWP's management efforts to provide continued high quality recreational opportunities on the Blackfoot.

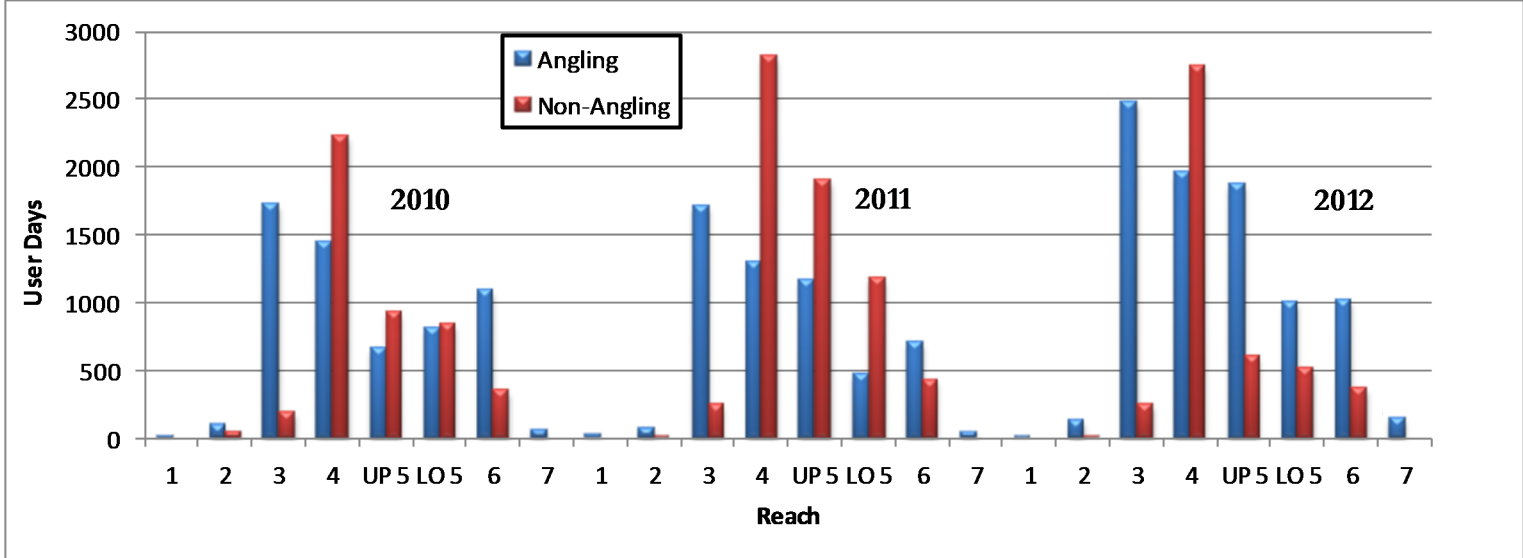
Special Recreation Permit (SRP) Program

FWP and the BLM have a cooperative Special Recreation Permit (SRP) program for managing commercial use, organized groups and competitive events on the Blackfoot River and adjacent agency owned or managed lands. Use reports are required for each authorized permittee and that data is compiled at the end of the year. In 2012 there were 73 active commercial permittees running trips on the Blackfoot River and 1 competitive event authorized under the Blackfoot SRP program. A description of the use authorized by the SRP program is described under the following categories: (1) commercial use, (2) competitive events and (3) organized groups.

Commercial Use

The primary types of commercial use occurring on the Blackfoot River are guided float angling and whitewater trips. Figure 5 illustrates the number of angling and non-angling user days conducted on the Blackfoot River for

Figure 5: 2010, 2011, and 2012 Commercial User Days by Use Type and River Reach.



each reach during 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Reach Three received the most pressure from commercial angling, while Reach Four had the largest amount of commercial non-angling user days. The majority of commercial angling use occurred in Reaches Three, Four, and Upper Five. Non-angling commercial use, such as whitewater trips, scenic floats and swiftwater rescue training were all reduced in 2012 but followed the similar reach trends of the previous years and primarily took place in Reach Four.

Please note that groups that float from one reach to the next are counted in all reaches in which they pass. For example, if a boat floated from Harry Morgan to Roundup it would be counted in reaches 3, 4 and upper 5, a total of 3 reaches.

Figure 6: Commercial User Days by Month

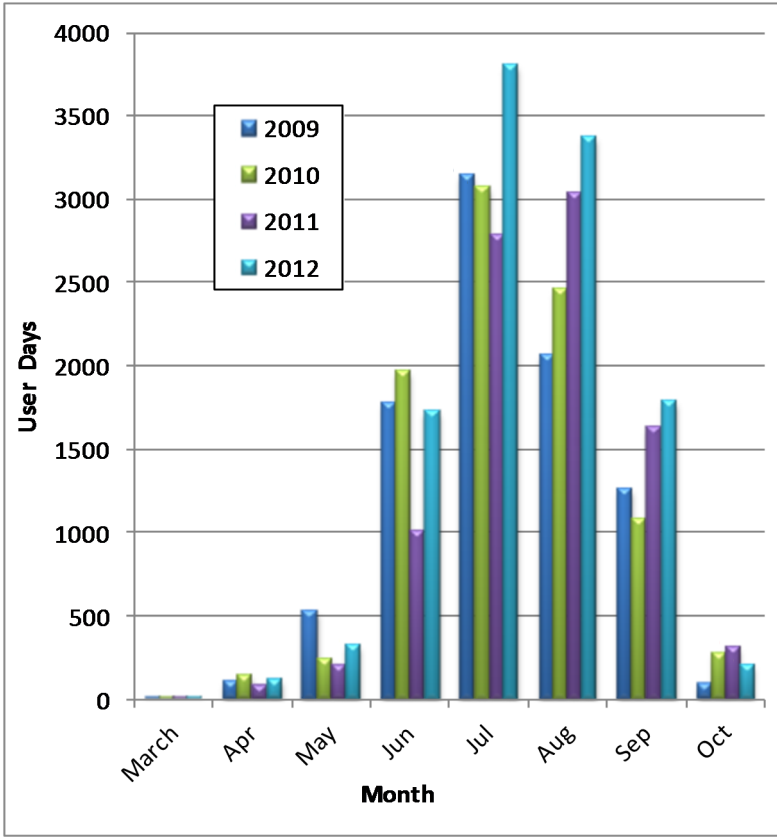


Figure 6 shows the number of commercial user days from month to month during the past four seasons. The primary season of commercial use is Memorial Day through Labor Day. In 2012 78% of the total commercial use days occurred during that time period.

All Commercial use in 2012 on the Blackfoot culminated in a 20.5% increase in user days over the 2011 season.

Competitive Events

One competitive event took place on the Blackfoot River and consisted of a canoe and kayak slalom competition and downriver race. The slalom course was set up at the Roundup rapid, just upstream from the Roundup FAS, and the downriver race began at Johnsrud Park FAS and ended at Weigh Station FAS. The three-day event was attended by 67 participants, which was an increase from the 45 participants attending the same event in 2011.

Organized Groups

No Organized Group Special Recreation Permits were issued in 2012.

Fee Revenue

Table 2 shows the breakdown of fees collected for certain types of recreational activities on the Blackfoot River and at access sites. Fees are collected at campgrounds, for picnic shelter reservations, and for commercial use and competitive events permitted under the Blackfoot River

Table 2: Fee Revenue Summary (2010, 2011 and 2012)

Source of Fee Revenue	2010	2011	2012
Harry Morgan Campground	\$1,041.15	\$792.00	\$761.49
River Junction Camp-ground	\$1,894.52	\$467.78	\$836.68
Russell Gates Campground	\$5,728.06	\$4,034.75	\$6,153.45
Ninemile Prairie Campground	\$876.00	\$781.50	\$1,150.35
Corrick’s River Bend Campground	\$6,020.65	\$3,148.90	\$4,266.21
Thibodeau Campground	\$3,401.75	\$2,344.50	\$3,688.55
Johnsrud Shelter Rental	\$225.00	\$75.00	\$150.00
Commercial Use SRP	\$29,848.50	\$28,436.62	\$39,599.76
Competitive Event SRP	\$327.00	\$135.00	\$201.00
Totals	\$49,649.63	\$40,216.05	\$56,608.59

SRP program. The total amount of fee revenue generated for 2012 was \$56,608.59. Most noticeable was the increase of commercial use in 2012 leading to the increase in revenue generated. All campgrounds in 2011 generated less revenue than in previous years. Weather and flooding directly contributed to reduced use. A return to traditional use and an increase in camping at many locations in 2012 can be directly attributed to dry and sunny weather through the season.

River Ranger Patrols and Enforcement

Since 2004 patrols and coordinated enforcement/education has been an important tool in ensuring family-friendly recreational opportunities on the Blackfoot and in addressing the negative behaviors of some recreationists, such as disorderly conduct, littering and respect for private property. Presence and patrols continue to be important in maintaining desirable conditions for recreationists both at access sites and on the river itself.

FWP River Rangers conducted several patrol floats from Cedar Meadows FAS to Johnsrud FAS covering 51 miles of river. Three camps were contacted outside of the recreation corridor and encouraged to practice Leave No Trace ethics.

In the recreation corridor, 4 illegal camps were cited and 15 other illegal fire rings were dismantled and the area rehabbed to natural conditions.

Float patrols enable Rangers and Wardens to access areas not that can not be accessed through land based patrols and provide a more comprehensive ability to address illegal camping and other rule and regulation violations. In addition to law enforcement, float patrols also provide additional opportunities for contacting floaters and anglers, educating users on river ethics, etiquette and how to reduce user conflicts, and gathering information on recreational use and resource conditions.

Blackfoot River Clean-up

The ninth annual Blackfoot River Clean-up took place on July 28. The event is held annually on the last Saturday in July and is sponsored by the Blackfoot Home and Community Club, FWP and the BLM.

Table 3: Blackfoot River Clean-up Statistics

Year	Trash Collected						Participants
	Aluminum Cans	Glass Bottles	Plastic Bottles	Shoes	Hats	Inner-Tubes	
2004	1951	300	N/A	36	N/A	N/A	74
2005	2741	173	185	63	19	12	101
2006	3994	250	297	84	N/A	16	118
2007	3365	194	459	88	8	18	257
2008	1131	54	171	58	8	0	173
2009	1551	72	178	89	11	14	139
2010	1027	89	166	41	7	10	116
2011	221	34	24	15	8	3	108
2012	450	35	85	18	4	7	77

Table 3 compares the amount of litter collected for each clean-up year and the number of participants involved. The amount of unwanted material in the river has been leveling off over the last few years, an encouraging sign. Despite having fewer participants in 2012, the 77 willing volunteers collected more trash than in 2011, likely due to the high river flows that were experienced in 2011.

Float-In Camp Site



Permit Required

For more information, or to obtain a permit, contact
FWP Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
406-542-5500

Float-in Camping

In June of 2012 FWP, with the assistance of Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper Jerry O'Connell, piloted a new float-in campsite program at select FAS's along the Blackfoot River. The program consisted of campsites at River Junction (1 campsite), Ninemile Prairie (1 campsite) and Corrick's Riverbend (2 campsites). Campsites were permitted on a first-come, first-served basis and gave campers the opportunity to reserve a site via special permit to ensure that the campsite would be available when they arrived. These sites had no tables or fire rings and were not accessible to drive-up camping.

Because of the sites' relatively primitive condition and their location immediately adjacent to the river, permittees were responsible for adhering to Leave No Trace ethics such as managing human waste, utilizing a firepan for campfires, keeping to minimum group sizes, and other practices that lessen impacts and encourage appropriate river use.

Site inventory, monitoring and patrols were conducted to evaluate for resource impacts, verify that permittees were complying with permit stipulations, and monitor for use of the campsites by unpermitted groups.

The initial pilot season of this new opportunity was met with much enthusiasm from those who utilized the new float-in campsites. Over the course of the season, 45 permits were requested and 120 visitors stayed a night at one of the 4 float-in sites.

Comment Cards were returned from float-in campers to FWP with ratings and comments. The feedback was very useful and overwhelmingly positive with 63% rating the acceptability of the camping experience a 5 out of 5 or "very acceptable", the remainder of cards stated a 4 out of 5. All returned comment cards indicated that groups would be "very likely" to use the float-in system again. Positive comments such as "Great Idea" and "Great camp, love this idea! Hope more sites can be available in the future" were most common on returned cards.

The program will continue in a pilot phase for the 2013 season with the possibility of expanding the program in the future. For information about float-in campsites or to obtain a permit for a camp during the 2013 season please call (406) 542-5564.



Wheels and axel, some of the human debris thrown into the Blackfoot River is still surfacing several years after the Milltown Dam removal.

Accomplishments

- Introduced the float-in camping pilot program for the Blackfoot River.
- Installed and monitored additional Self-registration kiosks at FASs
- Installed additional traffic counters at several FASs and BLM sites.
- FWP Rangers worked with community and school groups on noxious weed pull projects at Harpers Lake FAS and Russell Gates FAS.
- FWP Rangers planted trees at Clearwater Crossing FAS .
- Increased on water patrols and cleanup efforts through out the Blackfoot corridor.
- FWP Staff removed a problem Mountain Lion and Black Bear from Harpers Lake FAS and Russell Gates FAS respectively.
- The River Management Society's River Ranger Rendezvous was held at Lubrecht Forest and on the Blackfoot River in mid-June.
- Clearwater Aquatic Invasive Species check station found 2 confirmed cases of Eurasian Water Milfoil, a very invasive non-native species.

Upcoming News for 2013

- The Milltown Dam removal project is now in State Park development. The area will continue to remain closed to the public until July 2013 while construction and restoration efforts are underway.
- FWP, with assistance from the Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper, will continue to evaluate self-registration kiosks to better understand recreation use data.
- Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) check stations will continue with mandatory checks on all watercraft passing through Clearwater Junction.
- Re-development of Weigh Station FAS will occur in spring of 2013.
- Food Storage orders will be enacted at various FAS campgrounds. Individual sites will be posted with requirements and educational information to reduce negative human, bear encounters.

Contact Information

For further information about the content of this annual report or for questions/comments regarding recreation or recreation management, please contact:

Chet Crowser
FAS Program Coordinator
3201 Spurgin Rd
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 542-5562
E-mail: ccrowser@mt.gov

